Editorial

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The political condition of our time

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Do we live today in a particularly difficult or turbulent political period? This question is more and more often raised in both scholarly and public debates, and the starting assumption is that it will be answered affirmatively. More specifically, it is assumed that we experience a crisis of democracy, or at least a transformation of democracy. Like its predecessors, 'post-industrial society' during the 1960s and 'post-modernity' during the 1980s, the term 'post-democracy' diffused very quickly and widely after it was coined at the very beginning of this century. Often regardless of – in many cases, presumably, in ignorance of – the analysis proposed by Colin Crouch (2004), it seemed easy to accept that many current societies had de-democratized, that their core democratic self-understanding had been profoundly undermined in actual political practices.

Receding tides?

The Spanish novelist and essayist Javier Marías (2018) recently reflected in his regular column in the periodical *El País Semanal* about the ways in which the world has been transformed since the beginning of this century. He agreed with the widespread opinion that those transformations are highly worrying, but then took a step back. If we move from observations about this recent past to the beginnings of the 19th and 20th centuries then our current experience pales in comparison. Between 1800 and 1818, the world had gone from revolution to reaction, passing through major warfare. Between 1900 and 1918, the proud march of industrial progress, celebrated in World Fairs, had led to the mass slaughtering of the First World War. While Marías ominously concluded by wishing that the years 2039–45 may not resemble the related period of the preceding century, his reflections overall demand to carefully look at longer-term historical developments before rushing to strong conclusions about the present.

The aftermath of the First World War can be seen as witnessing the apparent breakthrough of modern democracy, at least in formal terms. While democracy had been on

the agenda in the revolutionary events of the late 18th century, the 19th century rather saw the 'persistence of the Old Regime', as historian Arno Mayer (1981) had put it. The year 1919, though, marked the introduction of free and equal universal suffrage in many countries, even though restricted to male citizens in quite a number of them, which is an important qualification. Political scientists would later speak of a first 'wave of democratization'. This metaphor seems to suggest that the waters will also recede, but similarly that the force of the tides cannot be stopped. Drawing on natural occurrences, the metaphor removes democracy from human agency and imagination. Thus, it is unfortunate in many respects, but its use tells us something about how political analysts see this peculiar phenomenon, which is democracy. Tellingly, the metaphor manages to both insinuate a lawlike nature of democratization and a high degree of unpredictability. We claim to know that the waters will recede, but we do not know when and how strong the ebb will be. Furthermore, in this image, there is rather little that human beings can do about the phenomenon.[1] If one develops the metaphor further, it even suggests, ironically, that human action can do a little to mitigate the forces of democracy, by building dams or wave-breakers, but nothing to promote them – in contrast to recent jargon of 'democracy promotion', which interestingly is always meant to be pursued abroad and never at home. Finally, the metaphor also connects processes of very different kinds, namely a recurrent one, waves, and one that is mostly considered as linear, democratization, one of the many supposed trends of modernization. In other words, the image seems to suggest that every further wave will advance beyond the point where the preceding one stopped. Empirical political science remains content with counting the number of democratic polities after each wave, and then is satisfied to note that this number increases. Political philosophy, in contrast, needs to reflect on some kind of inescapability of democracy, once other forms of legitimating power have been discredited.

Such fundamental differences in understanding democracy stand in the background of the contributions to this issue, but they cannot be fully addressed nor even be made entirely explicit here. The main focus of this issue is on a possible recent transformation of democracy, but this brief historical and conceptual excursion is meant to make clear that this topical question can neither be confronted from a very present-oriented perspective nor without renewed conceptual reflection.

If we briefly look at the supposed 'receding wave' of the period between the two world wars of the 20th century, it is easy to recognize that the destruction of democratic institutions in many countries was far from a pre-determined event following any iron law, but something consciously brought about the interaction between existing elites and new political actors, who were rising to influence due to democratic participation rules. No wave was receding; if there was one, it was brought to a halt and the waters pushed back. Furthermore, these interactions took place relatively shortly after democratic rules had been introduced, and this often half-heartedly, more because of the absence of alternatives than out of conviction of their normative superiority or functional viability. And we should also note that democratic institutions were undergoing rather similar challenges in many countries, but they collapsed only in some. In turn, where they collapsed, they were often only recreated after military defeat of democracy's opponents or after profound crisis of the non-democratic alternatives.

Thus, those events lend themselves to generating some *general* insights that are by far not widely shared by current political observers. First, democracy would be misunderstood as a political phenomenon that tends naturally towards extension over time, not even in 'cyclical' form. Second, democracy's fragility largely comes from within; there is a permanent risk of self-cancellation (Karagiannis, 2016). Third, there are no conditions under which democratic institutions necessarily break down; their implosion can be resisted. Fourth, the capacity for avoiding self-cancellation resides less in institutional design than in commitment to democratic processes, a democratic societal self-understanding.

Having said this, one needs to add that there are also *specific* features of the inter-war constellation that need consideration. It is these features that figure strongly when parallels between the current political situation and the one of the inter-war period are evoked today, and they are striking indeed: the Great Depression is compared with the financial crisis triggered in 2008 and its impact on the socio-economic situation of many citizens; one observes an apparent repetition of the rapid rise of exclusionary and xenophobic nationalism as well as an often rapidly decreasing support for the supposedly established democratic political forces. These are without doubt significant parallels, but it seems they are often too easily and too quickly mobilized, tending to dramatize current events and even implying some degree of inevitability, because they refer prominently to socio-economic 'factors' apparently external to democracy and about which little can easily be done.

The last half century: Democracy after 'democratization'

Thus, the reflection on the inter-war crisis of democracy is useful, but it has its limits. To avoid premature conclusions from this specific historical comparison, it is useful to place the current challenges to democracy in their own context, the one of the past half century, and to bear in mind the general insights mentioned above, which help not to succumb to socio-economic and historical determinism.

Thus, the specified guiding question would be: on what is the perception based that we experience a crisis of democracy that puts at risk the supposed achievements of our 'consolidated democracies', another favourite term of political science? Has the democratic quality of our institutions and commitments significantly declined over the past half century?

We may just take a brief look, to start with, at some of the societies that are mentioned today as examples for the retreat of democracy, such as: the USA of Donald Trump, the East Central Europe of Orbán and Kaczyński, the Brazil of Bolsonaro, 'state capture' in South Africa, populist movements coming to government power in Southern Europe. And then let's compare the present with the situation a half century ago: in the USA, civil rights activist Martin Luther King and presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated in 1968. In East Central Europe, the so-called Prague Spring, aiming at democratizing socialism, was suppressed by the military intervention of the Warsaw Pact forces led by the Soviet Union. In Brazil, a military dictatorship was installed in 1964. In South Africa, the apartheid government increased the oppression of the majority of the population. In Southern Europe, Spain and Portugal's authoritarian regimes had persisted since the 1930s; Greece witnessed a *coup d'état* that brought a military junta to

power in 1967. In direct comparison with the year 1968, the year 2018 does not appear at first sight to provide a particularly bleak image of democracy.

But to get closer to an answer to our question, we need to introduce temporality into this static comparison of two moments in time. Three aspects are important. First, while 1968 was a year in which authoritarianism was a dominant approach to government in many parts of the world, the year also saw an intensification of political contestation, much of which was aimed at strengthening democracy. The Prague Spring has already been mentioned. It was paralleled in Western Europe by the students' and workers' protests that came to be known as the two red years or, more briefly and lastingly, '1968'. Similar mobilizations occurred in Latin America, leading in Chile to the formation of a government oriented at radical social transformation.

Second, the potential significance of these mobilizations was noted with concern by the elites. Those who invoke a 'crisis of democracy' today should be aware of the fact that this was exactly the main title of a report by the Trilateral Commission issued in 1975, which emphasized 'governability' problems in Western democracies (Crozier et al., 1975). The report shows, indirectly, that the doubts among the elites about the viability of democracy had never entirely disappeared. They were clearly not as pronounced as in the early 19th or early 20th century, and rejection of democracy was no longer an option, at least not in the so-called advanced democracies.[2] But the elites' concern was foremost the smooth and proper functioning of social institutions, not least economic institutions, and the question whether this functioning could be secured by democratic means was a secondary concern – and has largely remained so from this angle. What was seen as excesses of democracy from the late 1960s onwards was interpreted as a clear sign of 'crisis' of democracy because 'governability' seemed no longer guaranteed. When surveys today report about a decline of the previously very high commitment to democracy by the citizenry, as they do for some countries, this should be seen in the context of prior elite disaffection and the public expression of this disaffection.

What we see today, namely, third, rather than a profound crisis of democracy, is better understood as a consequence of, and reaction to, actual 'democratization' that happened on an almost global scale during the closing decades of the 20th century. Political scientists describe the recent end of restrictive regimes of various kinds as a 'third wave of democratization', supported by figures on the number of countries that have formally democratic regimes. On those counts, they can even identify elements of a recently receding tide, part of what we aim to capture here as the political condition of our time. But this valid information remains largely devoid of meaning if it is not set in the context of recent political experience.

Karl Mannheim (1935) coined the term 'fundamental democratization' for the political changes after the First World War, and he had mainly the granting of universal suffrage in mind, in particular for the case of Weimar Germany. His term may gain its full meaning at the end of the 20th century. In many – not all – cases, the suffrage then was not 'granted' but claimed and seized by an often highly mobilized population, and intense participatory processes were going on at least temporarily. Key examples are post-apartheid South Africa and post-dictatorship Brazil (Mota and Wagner, 2019), but many other cases had similar features. Thus, democratization became 'fundamental' because it started to include the majority of the population in a direct way, no longer formally

excluded and neither merely channelled into politics through hierarchical mass organizations.

However, this increase in political participation coincided – and not 'coincidentally' – with a decreasing capacity of governments to shape society, given the higher degree of connectedness, in particular through extended chains of economic production and exchange, but also in cultural terms. Much public and scholarly debate attributes this decline in political capacity to 'globalization', as if there were a process external to socio-political life and driven by its own logics. But at a closer look it becomes recognizable how the extension of economic relations across state boundaries had been a political project that emerged in the 1960s in response to higher levels of contestation which could no longer be contained by abolishing democratic forms. Thus, a core feature of the political condition of our time is the coexistence of a vibrant civil society and citizenry, capable of making legitimate claims, or at least understandable ones, with democratic political institutions that have become unable to address these claims in any satisfactory way. It seems inappropriate to call this constellation a crisis of democracy: political participation is high and democratic institutions persist. The problem is rather the mismatch between the two components of the constellation, which may be higher than at any moment in the history of modern democracy. Rather than a crisis, we are facing a transformation of democracy that is likely to require both new intellectual tools for understanding it and new political tools to deal with it.

All articles assembled in this issue address aspects of this new constellation. But the first set of four articles does so rather directly, whereas the second set of three articles focuses on wider societal issues with an impact on the political condition, but much less directly so. Each of the articles makes an important theoretical, conceptual, empirical and/or methodological contribution in its own right and with its own focus – they should be read on grounds of those merits. Their authors may permit us, so we hope, or at least forgive us, to present them here only in view of the dimensions of the current political condition that they contribute to highlight.

Varieties and transformations of democracy

Often, it is assumed that modern polities are based on a set of universal principles, such as equality, freedom, rights, and democracy, and on a well-defined set of institutions that are seen as the realization of those principles. In the current global context, furthermore, it is expected that any refinement of political practices that may be needed will evolve in exchange of experiences across polities by transnational epistemic communities. The article by Pertti Alasuutari and Valtteri Vähä-Savo is set in the scholarly context of epistemic governance studies, but it takes a very particular angle. It analyses the degree to which legislative debates actually refer to experiences elsewhere, and it finds that this is strikingly less the case in the US Congress than in any other of the 13 legislatures that they studied. This difference could be due to a certain parochialism, or alternatively to a self-understanding that considers US democracy as a very particular one, having little to learn from others. While both of this is true to a certain extent, the authors' closer look reveals that a pluralistic view of possible varieties of democracy (Blokker, 2008) is far from the US lawmakers' mind. Rather, in a somewhat paradoxical

fashion, they tend to see their own polity as embodying universal principles, claiming ownership of those principles, and thus having in their own polity the yardstick with which to measure whether those principles are realized. 'America first' is more than a recent electoral slogan.

Arguably, such an attitude makes it difficult to identify transformations in the practices within one's own polity. Despite the intense ongoing judicial investigation, therefore, the way in which the Trump presidential campaign possibly transforms US politics through its innovative use of social media has been insufficiently addressed in its wider ramifications. This is also due to the fact that too little is known about the relation between the use of social media and political communication, the question that Josep Lobera and Victor Sampedro address in their analysis of information flows in recent electoral campaigns in Spain. The formal design of modern democratic institutions made the individual act of voting the central node. As a consequence, political technologies came to focus on making individuals vote for a given political party or candidate. In a competitive context, the use of a new political technology provides a short-term advantage to one candidate over others. This advantage can be crucial for a particular election, even though it will tend to be reduced as competing candidates come to resort to the same technology. Arguably, this was a key element in inter-war political mobilizations that brought right-wing extremist parties to power. Currently, again, similar political formations are ahead of others in the use of new political technology. This feature will need to be added to further comparisons between the inter-war period and the present. The broader question here is the one of the quality of political communication, the time-honoured question of the public sphere and the formation of public opinion, but it is a question that has been relegated to the background owing to the instrumental focus of the political class on technologies of political control.

Staying within Spain, the articles by Daniel Gamper Sachse and by Peter Wagner address the recent – and ongoing – conflict over claims to Catalan independence as a case through which to explore further the changes in our political condition. In both articles, emphasis is placed on the fact that available concepts do not lend themselves easily to analysing and interpreting the conflict. Gamper tests whether the concept of populism, currently widely used to label new political phenomena, is useful to grasp the movement for Catalan independence. He finds some validity, but insists that the Catalan movement would make for a very a-typical kind of populism, namely one in which the democratic experience is central. Wagner, in turn, focuses on the use of concepts within the conflict itself, such as most importantly the concepts of democracy, rights, and freedom. He sees the conflict as being led by the independence movement as a struggle over the adequate interpretation of the relation between Catalonia and Spain. Symptomatic for the current political condition, existing political concepts can relatively easily be destabilized, but it is much more difficult to re-stabilize them as a basis for acting in common.

Beyond political concepts and institutions

One would not do justice to the second set of articles in this volume if one subsumed them straightforwardly under the heading of exploring the political condition of our time.

In contrast to the first set, political concepts and institutions are not at all in their focus. Each one of them, rather, addresses a core problem in one area of the social sciences, each through profound conceptual reflection and, in the case of Matthew Gibson's article, also innovative methodologies. For this journal, they continue the longstanding interest in the social study of emotions and in the sociology of knowledge and the sciences respectively. At the same time, though, they can all also be read as providing significant insights for a wider understanding of contemporary politics.

Emotions are in the centre of Matthew Gibson's and of Paola Rebughini and Adrian Scribano's articles. Gibson provides a detailed and differentiating analysis of 'self-conscious emotions' such as pride, shame, guilt, humiliation and embarrassment, and the relations between them. The political significance of such emotions can hardly be overestimated, considering that a feeling of being humiliated can release enormous political energies. Taking a very different approach, Rebughini and Scribano come to emotions from the study of social movements. Against some recent developments, they remind of the benefit of studying emotions from the angle of collective action, indeed to see social movement activities as collective emotional experiences. This perspective resonates with Gamper's observation on Catalan independentism, and it also connects to the general question of the place of emotions in major social transformations, as emphasized by William Sewell (2005).

On its own terms, Bogdan Brustureanu's article is an exercise in trans-disciplinary reflection through the use of conceptually guided analogy. He explores if and how the concept of 'entrepreneurship' can be transferred from business studies to the sociology of scientific activities, looking at academics as 'knowledge entrepreneurs'. Doing so, at the same time, he widens the angle on recent social transformations. In a broader societal understanding, the rise of neo-liberalism has been seen as making human beings look at their lives as enterprises. Within economic sociology, the emphasis on autonomy and creativity at the work place has been analysed as a transformation of capitalist practices in response to critiques (Boltanski and Chiapello, 1999). Brustureanu's article may contribute to connecting such analyses towards an understanding of entrepreneurship as a form of human action.

Notes

1. For the attraction of the ocean to human imagination as a phenomenon that defies both human knowledge and controlling action, see Brugidou and Clouette (2018).
2. The authoritarian governments in Southern Europe all ended in 1974/75, but the military coup in Chile in 1973 had Western understanding and support. Javier Cercas's (2009) masterful reconstruction of the attempted *coup d'état* in Spain in 1981 shows how fragile and conditional the elite commitment to democracy was at that moment.

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